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In the format of a letter to a student teacher, the author talks about the role of the English teacher, especially in the urban junior college class, and stresses the need for breaking down the "walls" which separate the teacher from the students and the students from each other. Recognition of the close relationship between the classroom world and the outside world of social unrest and change is considered a prerequisite for effective teaching. Emphasis is given to the type of learning which could take place if teachers would shed outdated concepts of their roles and deal openly with the lives of the students. (BN)

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A LETTER TO A STUDENT TEACHER

Dear Jean:

I came to see you teach your "remedial" English class yesterday---Communication Skills, it is called. I came to try to help you find your strengths, your style, to help you know the part of you that teaches best.

My notes say, "She's gaining confidence, now. Lectured and read some poetry. Occasional class participation..." But the flood of thoughts that came to me as I observed from my side-row seat, could not be put into notes. I thought about your passive, uninvolved students all day yesterday, and well into the night. The thoughts are with me again today.

The sight of your well meaning efforts, your sincerity, your fervent desire to be helpful to your students, to let them know what you know poetry to mean, your lecture to them with occasional dictations---"a symbol is...", these set well with me, as decent intentions. In your lecture, you seem to say classical and right things about Robert Frost, about poetry and literature, in general. You seem to show that you know something about the problems of an urban junior college class, whose minority students have known precious little success in academic subjects such as yours.

But how can I tell you, without discouraging you disastrously, that your class was wrong--all wrong. It was painfully bad, not because of your intentions, because the

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Lord knows, you would give anything to be a good teacher. The class was bad, not because of what you said, but because of what it was. You said it in your lecture. Robert Frost said it in his poem. And the students heard it when you read the poem and, presumably, when it was being discussed.

"Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
what I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense."

Behind my own wall, I felt the wall between you and the class, and the many walls that separated the students from each other. The walls were heavy and thick. As the lecture continued, as the passivity and ennui became more and more established, the walls became thicker, more inpenetrable and for me and, I suspect, for them, less easy to bear.

Behind their walls, the students seemed inert and vacant. Their faces seemed more of stone than of flesh which moves with the events of a human experience in which there is even slight involvement.

I can tell you these things partly because I feel you will understand them. For you have already gone patt way toward involving your students in their learning experiences. You have set them to work in small groups of their own leadership, groups which afford them the opportunity to offer their own perceptions and misunderstandings, and to discuss these freely and without penalty. I have heard you prescribe such procedures to your student-teaching colleagues with a certain amount of confidence that they would be helpful.

But how I can tell you that this kind of effort which tells the student that he is strong enough to take responsibility for part of his education, this kind of effort is not enough. (As you know, there are some traditional teachers who see the small-group learning efforts as a kind of crack-pot diversion from the main business of education. They look upon the supporters of this "student-centered" practice as though we have spurious motives separated from the reasonable goals of learning which would have society's best interests in mind.

While your students were sitting mutely through your poetry lesson, hardly involved in the sounds and meanings of the poetry, (how could they be when the meanings of poetry are so personal, so intimate, so filled with private associations and precious memories?) while this was going on, the street cleaners, policemen, administrators, faculty and a harried community were trying to clean up the mess of the more than one-week-long riots at Columbia University. And but a mile away, the campus at San Francisco State College was again being stunned by the latest student uprising. And one was brewing at Stanford University.

Your class and these events are too closely related for us to ignore.

There is a revolution going on in higher education at the present time. It is partly obscured because the civil and human rights revolution tends to hide it from view.

But the two are closely intertwined. They affect each other. Activist students learned much from their early experiences in the South a few years ago. They learned that unacceptable conditions, which violated human decency as well as the spirit and letter of our Constitution, could be and were being tolerated. As their wrath mounted, they moved. They mounted political forces. They registered voters. They sat in. They marched.

And in doing these things, they found their own strength. Compared to watching TV, to driving Mustang convertibles, wearing Brooks Brothers suits, and aspiring to a junior management position in a well-ordered, but socially unconcerned corporation, the gratifications of these other vital endeavors could not be ignored.

And when they came back to their universities, colleges and junior colleges, they did not like what they found there, either. This has been most graphically portrayed in the recent essay gaining wide circulation among college students entitled "The Student as a Nigger."(1)

Several years ago I wrote an unpublished essay called "Freedom in the Classroom." The essential point in that peaceful document was the process of freedom is rarely found in our traditional classroom practice. Such is the tradition that we have fallen heir to, and that most of us are taught to tolerate.

To defend certain aspects of the status quo, let me assure you that we need leadership from teachers. We need colleges which are organized. We need goals. We need to establish areas of responsibility. And, in this Great Society of large and unwieldy organizations, we need procedures which will enable us to do our jobs interdependently. Yes, we need order.

But when it comes to the human relationship, to the pesson within the outer facade, to the well-springs of motivation, to the fully functioning and well-integrated cognitive and affective response of the student, we can no longer depend upon mechanical or authoritarian procedures which ignore the human rights and freedoms of the students. We need order, here, too. An order which produces life, vitality, concern, responsibility to others expressed in human terms that are achieved through dialogue and confrontation.

Today, a few students know well, and more will know with greater certainty, that they have the right to be consulted and involved in their learning experiences. These economically and socially unprivileged students of yours, who take on a pose of passivity as though it were their real nature, will learn of these rights and customs later. One only hopes that when they learn of our indignities upon them (and of the inability of some of their teachers to do anything

but perpetuate these)---one only hopes that their wrath will not result in violence. (The word"violence" is becoming an increasingly familiar word in the vocabulary of young people today. It is, for them, a realistic and often verbalized alternative to the conditions in which they find themselves. Witness: Columbia University, Howard University, Newark, Chicago, and the countless burned cities of America following the assassination of Martin Luther King.)

The place for them to learn where and how to exercise their rights and privileges, where this can be done in the spirit of comradérie, and with the goal of learning in mind, is in the classroom---not on the streets. The manner of this learning can be peaceful, not violent. And it can be done in concert with the great literaturew which is already part of our curriculum---where we consider the plight of man, the meaning of his life, his tragedies, his aspirations, his dreams, his surmountable and insurmountable difficulties with his fellow man. This is the stuff of poetry and of literature. This is certainly involved in the poem of your lesson---Frost's "Mending Wall."

But in too many English classes---not only yours---the lesson has not started yet. If there are walls in the world, and if walls are important to talk about, then let us ask about the walls in the immediate area of our life---the "here-and-now," the walls between the student and the teacher,

between the students and each other, between the teacher and the administrator, walls between departments, professions, and any other kind of wall that is in the immediate environment. But mainly, let us talk about us, and where we really are.

And if we fail to do this, then let us talk about this failure and why we can not do it or why we will not do it, and what it means not to do it---and the price we pay in terms of education, integrity and in establishing hopeful and meaningful possibilities for the future of all of us. Let us start here at this point, and then let us begin.

And this is where I am with you. I can no longer witness the ritual of education without the substance of it. I can not congratulate you for a job well done when you have been an accomplice to this educational criminality, as have I.

Our procedures, our traditions have come down to us from a legacy of what B.F. Skinner (2) calls aversive teaching, and which earlier students knew clearly as punitive. Once, this would do. When colleges were small, intimate and for a verbally and economically elite group, their practices---punitive or benevolent---were not questioned. It was enough that the colleges existed. Their clients could overcome anything that colleges could do to them. But now society expects too much of higher education to let it go its ordinary way; it needs too much from this enterprise which has become massive and basic to the trends of our upwardly mobile society.

Today, the very ideals and practices of our society must be part of the fabric of the process and content of that educational experience. Because so much depends upon it, we must examine it relentlessly, and it must pass the examination with the yardstick of freedom forever applied.

Upon your field of literature and communication, much depends. Your colleagues have vowed to inspect the values which set a man's life in its particular action. But they profess, too often, to be doing something about it. In failing to deal with the lives at hand---the teacher's own life, his own foibles, his own human inadequacies which are there for all to see and to openly share---and the lives of the students---in failing to deal with these matters, we have made our learning experiences abstract performances wherein the teacher has an opportunity to nourish an ego which otherwise may not have been well attended to, and which will now be seemingly attended through the response and observation of his students.

Literature can do more for all of us, particularly if we mean to use it educationally. In it, we can find the best parts of ourselves. (And the worst parts of others?)

The classroom is a place where we can come to terms with the selves of ourselves, where we can serve those selves, where we can start with the simple and naive questions that come out of the honest questioning of those selves. And

where these questions can be tended by warm and understanding people who revel in the presence of other selves in quest of being and growth.

None of this is easy to do. It takes trust, skills and a willingness to contend with one's own error. It takes a set of people who are willing to work with the human condition and all the improbabilities, uncertainties and irrationalities which people bring to situations when they are being human. Is this not what the poet does for us? More than any other, he tells us what life really is---by sharing his view of the world.

One last point: This concerns my notation; "She's gaining confidence, now." I wrote that with mixed feeling. Yes, I am pleased to see you gain this comfort about yourself. But you had this before you started to teach, at least a good deal more of it than you have right now. In our seminar a year earlier, I well recall that you had a greater sense of ease about who you are, your aspirations, your abilities, your confidence to come before people with the simple presence of yourself.

I am afraid that in our effort to teach you how to teach that we have taken something from you that was very precious, something we had no right to tamper with. In our endeavor to teach you "the role of the teacher", we made you distrust your youthful enthusiasm, your charge of delight,

the confidence in your own ability to make your own kind of relationship with your students. Compared to what you offer with the realness of yourself, the "role of the teacher", which some have proposed for you, is bloodless and cold. It is stilted, fake and unnecessary. It is inhuman, non-human and anti-human, and it neither serves you nor your very, very human students who are rendered less human by this behavior.

The concept of the "role of the teacher" serves to perpetuate an outdated myth that essentially proposes that "if you don't do this, something terrible will happen." It is based upon a distrust of people and their capacity to work together in good spirit. Studies of college students of today show that they welcome spontaneity, self-expression, individual autonomy, integrity, a free flow of feelings and ideas conducive to personal growth and that they find the "submission to impersonal authority, as hypocrisy which is incompatible with their personal integrity." (3)

Freedom is alive today in many places where it did not exist even yesterday Many of us thank the poor, the racially denied, and I can thank the many students who have brought to my attention the rights and freedoms which even I possess, and which I have not taken into account until

this time. Because of them, I can now give voice to the deeper frustrations I felt about education even when I passed throggh it as a student, and which I came to know more iptimately in three decades of teaching. This note to you is my way of telling both of us that I am free to say these things, and that we are free to work for changes, and that we can do this in the name of education, an education which is consonant with our democratic principles and ideals. If you and I won't do this, who will?

And if not now, when?

Meyer M. Cahn
San Francisco State College
May 7, 1968

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